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SOME LESSER THRENODIES.

BY LEWIS WORTHINGTON SMITH.

OUR English literature has four great threnodies so significant, so full, so massive in their rounded survey of death through the sense of personal loss that we have come to look upon them as the finest and most perfect examples of the form that our language, or, indeed, any language, affords. They are Milton's "Lycidas," Shelley's "Adonais," Arnold's "Thyrsis" and Tennyson's "In Memoriam." They are all nobly individual, nobly representative of each poet's outlook upon life, and yet each is in its way broadly human and universal. Consequently, they are known of all men and all men delight in them. In a measure, it is the length of these threnodies that has established their permanent significance. They are great because they take up a great subject greatly, but they are great further because they develop it at, what is so near, to an exhaustive length.

There is another body of threnodies that are to be called lesser threnodies mainly because they do not carry the theme on to any such fulness of treatment. Some of them certainly strike a more intense lyric note within their range than do these other more magnificent organ chants of human loss and grief. Some of them are in their own way quite as memorable, quite as fine and high in their expression of the eternal passion over our human liability to dissolution. They are, some of them, less artificial, and they touch the nerve of a common and ever-present feeling more sharply.

It is the office of a threnody to find the universal in the personal, to pass from an individual sense of loss in death to the meaning and the mystery of death for all men. Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," for instance, is too closely concerned with the immediate occasion and the man for

us to feel this character in it. Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloomed" is also a lament for one man, Lincoln, and, as in "Oh, Captain, My Captain," he does not take us out to any larger feeling for the universal fact of man's subjection to death. This something beyond presentation of the man and the occasion for grieving over his loss the greater threnodies do for us. That friend of Milton's whom he celebrates in the "Lycidas" may have been no more than a name, so far as our interest in the poem is dependent upon what he was or what befell him. This is also true in a measure of the "In Memoriam." The "Adonais," to be sure, has the death of Keats for its theme, and the "Thyrsis" laments the passing of Clough. Both Shelley and Arnold, however, turn from Keats and Clough to larger themes than those of personal loss.

Literature is full of lamentings, but in this absorption and loss of the personal in the universal, the identification of the one with the other, there may in part be found the note of greatness. The full and rich elaboration of an "In Memoriam," that almost ceases to be a threnody, because it is so nearly a philosophy set to music, is not demanded of them, but we may ask for this quality of universality in them if we are to call them great. It is to be found in so short a poem as Landor's "Rose Aylmer."

"Ah, what avails the sceptred race,
 Ah, what the form divine.
 What every virtue, every grace.
 Rose Aylmer, all were thine.
 Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes
 May weep, but never see,
 A night of memories and of sighs
 I consecrate to thee."

The first four lines of this are as fine a lyric cry over the transiency of human good and beauty as man has ever penned. Death is a pitiful thing in the degree in which the life that death claims is fine and perfect, in the degree in which it is something that ought, for our human feeling, to be eternal. In these four lines Landor crowds together for us those things that most make the poignancy of that sense of loss in death, womanhood in the line of a great race, beauty in the highest form we can conceive of, the virtues and the graces that should forever be unassailable. The greater threnodies commemorate each the death of a man

highly gifted and gifted in ways that bring man, as in the poet, so near to the divine that we can but feel that he should be imperishable. They are creative powers that make him so in each case, powers of human efficiency that the world cannot well lose. In this poem of Landor's we have, not such a creative force and fire suddenly snuffed out in the very hour in which it was most prodigal of light and warmth for the world, but a created perfection of good and beauty shattered forever, body and spirit, as all such good and beauty must be forever while time runs on to eternity. Which is the more moving a spectacle, which strikes us the more with the subduing sense of our mortality, it would not be easy for any one to say. The fact that the greater threnodies draw their inspiration from the death of a man rather than from that of a woman is not clearly significant in this matter, although it may be held significant in some other matters, as we shall see later. Perhaps a lengthy treatment of the theme flows more easily from the thought of the cessation of a creative energy that might have gone on and on than from that of a finished perfection such as we feel in womanhood at its best. The elaboration of possibilities unfulfilled, whether by implication or otherwise, is probably more natural and easy than such elaboration of a fineness of human worth brought to its flower and then in the completion of its beauty dashed suddenly out of life. This last calls for a cry too intense and passionate for a mood of lingering meditation. Such a cry we have again in Byron's "Oh! Snatched Away in Beauty's Bloom."

- " Oh! snatched away in beauty's bloom,
On thee shall press no ponderous tomb:
But on thy turf shall roses rear
Their leaves, the earliest of the year;
And the wild cypress wave in tender gloom;
" And oft by yond blue gushing stream
Shall Sorrow lean her drooping head,
And feed deep thought with many a dream,
And lingering pause and lightly tread;
Fond wretch! as if her step disturbed the dead!
" Away! we know that tears are vain,
That death nor heeds nor hears distress:
Will this unteach us to complain?
Or make one mourner weep the less?
And thou—who tell'st me to forget,
Thy looks are wan, thine eyes are wet."

This is both less universal and less perfect than Lander's. It passes beyond the personal in the feeling of the first line and in the sense in the rest of the stanza that beauty should somehow be enduring. It is not happy, however, in the last line of the stanza, which gives the impression of poetic artifice. This is further the effect of the second stanza, especially in the personification of sorrow, which is never felt as an abstraction, a something outside of the actual occasion for sorrow, when it is felt as a real grief at all. There is again an implication of a higher mood than that of personal loss in the last stanza, a mood approaching that sense of the unavailing in all things human that we find in "Rose Aylmer." It falls short of that, however, in fulness of presentation and intensity of passion. It is double the length of Lander's poem, and yet it says less in that more extended treatment. Nevertheless, its deeper note is that of recognition of the transiency of all things fair, the pity of it that woman's loveliness should be "snatched away in beauty's bloom."

The conjunction of Byron and Wordsworth may, perhaps, seem a not wholly happy one, but in the latter's "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" there is observable a directness and simplicity that by contrast with Byron, suggest Lander.

"She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:

"A violet by the mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
—Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky.

"She lived unknown and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me."

This is a kind of goodness and beauty unlike that which Lander laments, the goodness and beauty of humility in the place of pride and distinction, of virtues and graces that hide themselves rather than of those that shine; but it is touched with the same feeling for a human perfection kept from the fulfilment of itself that we find in Lander. Here it is the more pathetic in the

fact that it has not had even its brief hour of earthly effulgence in the sight of men. It is, therefore, a beauty and goodness that has been doubly spent in vain. Landor and Wordsworth end each in a cry of personal pain, but neither poem is personal only. These cries serve but to accentuate the poet's fuller passion in the universal facts. They are wrung from the heart, not simply because of the death of Rose Aylmer or of Lucy, but because neither the "sceptred race" avails nor the "violet by the mossy stone Half hidden from the eye."

This threnody of Wordsworth's seems simple almost to the point of severity. It will appear more so if we place beside it the rich beauty of the song of Guiderius and Arviragus from "Cymbeline."

"Fear no more the heat o' th' sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages:
Golden lads and girls all must,
Like chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

"Fear no more the frown o' th' great;
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke;
Care no more to clothe and eat;
To thee the reed is as the oak;
The Sceptre, Learning, Physic, must
All follow this, and come to dust.

"Fear no more the lightning flash,
Nor th' all-dreaded thunder-stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finished joy and moan:
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee, and come to dust.

"No exorciser harm thee!
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill come near thee!
Quiet consummation have;
And renowned be thy grave!"

This is clearly another feeling about death than that of either of the preceding. It finds its occasion in recognition of the fact that "Golden lads and girls all must, Like chimney-sweepers, come to dust," but there is a serenity in the prospect, as the poet sees

it, altogether unlike that of the vision of Landor or Byron. The sceptre, learning, physic, love, must also come to dust, and it is the equality of all things in the grave that the poet makes us feel, rather than that bringing together of the irreconcilable in the destruction of something high and fine that should never be destroyed.

It cannot quite be said, I think, that this serenity is but the sign of greatness in Shakespeare, the mark of that loftiness of spirit that lifts him above the accidents of time and eternity alike. This is, perhaps, not so much the poet as his age. There was no such fulness of being in the Elizabethans as there is in us, large with life as that great time was. For them the quiet, the freedom from censure and from the tyrant's stroke that was to be consummated in death, was not so inadequate as it is for us. We certainly look beyond this life to the next with a less satisfied assurance than did the men of Shakespeare's day. What was to them a matter of course, placidly accepted, has, for us become a problem. Death is therefore for us not quite what it was for Shakespeare, and this must in part account for the attitude of Shakespeare as seeing in death a going forward of the tragedy of life with its thwartings and its denials to a surcease of them all in the equal repose of the grave. Life in our day is less a thwarting, less a denial, and consequently it less looks forward to find compensation for its ills in death. This is not saying that we are not touched by the sweetness and the meditative richness of this threnody. It is a noble expression of a mood that the modern mind doubtless shares at times with the Elizabethan. Otherwise Tennyson's volume of Shakespeare would hardly have been lying open before him at this page when he died, but it is a mood not so peculiarly our own as that of "Rose Aylmer." It is not so much a mood of loftier feeling as one of less sophistication. It is the mood of a life less gloriously lighted by the sun than our own, a mood, therefore, in which there is not so deep a sense of the darkness when the sun has gone down and left only a rack of clouds across the sky.

There is "A Dirge" of Richard Henry Stoddard's that, in its minor way, comes close to that essentially modern feeling for death as something taking away the fair and the lovely beyond the possibility of human understanding that Shakespeare did not have in the same sense.

- "A few frail summers had touched thee,
As they touch the fruit:
Not so bright as thy hair the sunshine,
Not so sweet as thy voice the lute.
Hushed the voice, shorn the hair, all is over:
An urn of white ashes remains;
Nothing else save the tears in your eyes,
And our bitterest, bitterest pains.
- "We garland thee now with white roses,
Both incense and gums on the shrine,
Play old tunes with the saddest of closes,
Dear tunes that once were thine!
But in vain, all in vain;
Thou art gone—we remain!"

This falls short of the intensity of "Rose Aylmer," but it has all the delicacy of Landor, all that sense of the irremediable loss in death that he makes us feel. Stoddard does not present that loss as so great a loss. It is in him not so many things passed away irrecoverably. It is fineness, maidenly gentleness and beauty, showing the promise of the flower in the tender hues of the opening bud, and in Landor it is all this and more. Nevertheless, it is in the same spirit, and quite as much as the earlier threnody it passes out of the personal into that larger world of human feeling that all men have in the presence of our mortality made visible in that quiet of the lips that shall never speak again.

In Oscar Wilde's "Requiescat" there is a mood like this of Stoddard's, the first discernible difference being that of a slightly greater emphasis upon the physical aspects of beauty as a symbol of the spiritual beauty breathing in it.

- "Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow.
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.
- "All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.
- "Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.

" Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast.
I vex my heart alone;
She is at rest.

" Peace, peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet.
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it."

There is in this a lingering sense of that repose in death that takes away much of its poignancy in the song from "Cymbeline." In Shakespeare, however, that sense is one as of something actual, as of a higher hope upon which the heart may establish itself, while in Wilde it is no more than an illusion which the poet permits himself for the sake of the color that it gives to his mood. It touches it with a lingering regret that intensifies the pain instead of lessening it. He would have us tread lightly in the feeling of our nearness to that stricken loveliness where lies "All her bright golden hair tarnished with rust."

One poem by an American poet yet living is entitled to be included in this group of lesser threnodies, a poem with a touch of nature in it as fine as that "among the untrodden ways" of Wordsworth and a purity as lily-like as that of Wilde's maiden who "hardly knew She was a woman, so Sweetly she grew," Bliss Carman's "Golden Rowan."

" She lived where the mountains go down to the sea,
And river and tide confer,
Golden Rowan, in Menalowan,
Was the name they gave to her.

" She had the soul no circumstance
Can hurry or defer.
Golden Rowan, of Menalowan,
How time stood still for her!

" Her playmates for their lovers grew,
But that shy wanderer,
Golden Rowan, of Menalowan,
Knew love was not for her.

" Hers was the love of wilding things;
To hear a squirrel chir
In the golden rowan, of Menalowan,
Was joy enough for her.

"She sleeps on the hill with the lonely sun,
Where in the days that were,
The golden rowan, of Menalowan,
So often shadowed her.

"The scarlet fruit will come to fill,
The scarlet spring to stir
The golden rowan, of Menalowan,
And wake no dream for her.

"Only the wind is over her grave,
For mourner and comforter,
And 'The Golden Rowan, of Menalowan,'
Is all we know of her."

There is a singing sweetness in this that is almost excessive. It is a part of that fuller emphasis upon qualities of loveliness in the woman that distinguishes the poem from others in which the stress is more upon the destruction and loss of those qualities than upon the qualities themselves. It is a maidenhood moving sweetly in the shadow and the mystery of death that is entrancing, a maidenhood so responsive to the joy of the wilding things about her that she passes like a dream to that sleep on the hill "Where in the days that were, The golden rowan, of Menalowan, So often shadowed her." She is a more intimate spirit of mountain and wood and sea than Wordsworth's Lucy, and it is a more appealing thing that the "Golden Rowan, of Menalowan, Knew love was not for her" than it is that Lucy was "A Maid whom there were none to praise And very few to love." The glow of a richer life and a fuller range of feeling is over it. These feelings are subtler, and the life itself is more tender and more finely endowed. It is tremulous with instincts that are awakened by the breath of being in countless created things, and yet

"The scarlet fruit will come to fill,
The scarlet spring to stir
The golden rowan, of Menalowan,
And wake no dream for her."

Finally, as an addition to the number of these poems from a poet whose temper and attitude toward life is unlike that of any of the poets so far heard, there is Arnold's "Requiescat." It has a glimpse of something larger both in death and in life than is to be found in any one of the others alone, and yet its passion

is hardly so intense and high as Landor's, its forward-looking trust not at all as sure as Shakespeare's, its perfection of womanhood not so delicate and fine and quivering as Carman's.

"Strew on her roses, roses,
And never a spray of yew;
In quiet she reposes;
Ah! would that I did too!

"Her mirth the world required;
She bathed it in smiles of glee.
But her heart was tired, tired,
And now they let her be.

"Her life was turning, turning,
In mazes of heat and sound;
But for peace her soul was yearning,
And now peace laps her round.

"Her cabined, ample spirit,
It fluttered and failed for breath;
To-night it doth inherit
The vasty hall of death."

Perhaps one might justly feel that this is a threnody only in a very qualified sense. The lamenting seems almost to have the character of a pæan. It acclaims the repose that is to be found in the "vasty hall of death" that follows the tragedy of life. It is the limitations of life that make escape from it at once a pitiful thing in the fact of those limitations themselves and a kindly thing in the repose from a turmoil to which so fine and high a thing as her "cabined, ample spirit" should not have been exposed. Because of this the lamenting that gives it character is for the thwarting of life in itself, for that breaking of the wings of aspiration against the cage of circumstance that only finds its completion in death, for that wearying of self in the giving of joy to a world that has too little joy of its own to give in return. So much it has in common with "Golden Rowan" that it presents the woman more than the end that comes to womanhood. In Carman, it is a womanhood that secludes itself from the world and expands almost shyly in the wild places. In Arnold, it is a womanhood that cannot so seclude itself from those "mazes of heat and sound" in which life is forever turning and never at rest. For both of them, however, the world is inadequate, and

in both poets it is that inadequacy that slips into death and is made one with it as a single ground for the mood of the threnody in the transiency and insufficiency of life.

It is to be observed that all these threnodies lament the passing of a woman, as all the four greater threnodies were seen to lament the death of a man. It might be easy to draw the conclusion that these lesser threnodies are so by virtue of their having a lesser theme, but that, obvious as it may seem, would be unjustifiable.

There are two things that give life its character as life, doing and being. These two things are loosely the different functions of man and woman. Which of them is the higher function it would be idle to say, except in particular cases. In general it can be said only that doing is more complex than being, both as perceived at any given moment and as perceived progressively. It often happens that the complex thing is the higher thing, but it is not necessarily so. Certainly being, rather than doing, as the characteristic of womanhood, is a thing calling for the more lyrical treatment. It is more intense as a poetic motive, since it pauses upon one thing, and so it gives occasion for that subjectivity that particularly distinguishes the lyric from other moods and manners. The mood of meditation more thoughtfully elaborated is not to be expected in a threnody whose theme is womanhood, the threnody of being, as it is in one which laments the passing of man, the threnody of doing.

Without saying that the greater length of the four first threnodies should be held as ultimately making them greater and that these poems whose theme is the mortality of woman's fineness, purity and beauty are as great as they in the sum total of achievement, it is still, it seems to me, quite indisputable that either "Rose Aylmer" or "Golden Rowan" or Arnold's "Requiescat" is a more perfect work of art than, for instance, "Lycidas." We cannot study either of them in the effort to discover the poet's feeling about the life of his time, but we can realize more deeply the passion of lamenting in each, because it is not diffused or given the movement of constructive thought. There is so close a likeness in all these eight poems as compared with the other four that the unification of theme seems at once significant of the universality of feeling for the bloom of womanhood that in its very delicacy and fragrance and beauty contains the seeds

of decay. The main feeling in all of them is the same, and they exhibit only such variations of it as are in accord with variations of personality. This is not true in any like degree of the other group. They cannot be said to have any one main feeling in the same sense, and it seems not unreasonable to say that this is to be accounted for on the ground that the feeling in them is not so universal, that it is the product of a more highly sophisticated intelligence than of a common and elemental attitude toward life and the world. If the lesser threnodies are so by virtue of their springing from something more common and elemental in our human nature than the others, it is not unreasonable to say that they have a superiority of their own, a lyric spontaneity higher and more moving, an immediacy of appeal more unobstructed, and a comprehensive sweep more passionately inclusive than that of the longer and more fully wrought poems that we are accustomed to think of particularly as our great monuments of verse in the elegiac form.

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